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**Partnering for Student Learning: The University Library Information Commons**

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**Abstract:**

*This paper examines the emerging role of the Library Information Commons for providing integrated instruction and support of student learning with a focus on the Georgia Institute of Technology. It reports on the success of the Information Commons as a collaborative venture between the Library and Information Technology, discusses organizing principles, and reviews the literature on partnering for student learning and assessment.*

**Text:**

This paper explores the potential of the venue of the library Information Commons as an integrated facility for facilitating and assessing student learning. It describes lessons learned, and what steps to consider in planning and staffing student-centered, integrated services, facilities and resources for using 150+ software applications, for producing multi-media presentations, as well as providing traditional library services for searching, retrieving, processing and interpreting information.

As an agent of change, the Information Commons in the library, also called Learning Commons on some university campuses, redefines the library as integral to the instructional efforts of the university, and strategically aligns the library with the institution’s vision, mission, and goals. From a regional accrediting association perspective, this development is significant for two reasons: (1) accreditation association standards require academic programs to perform

outcomes assessment, i.e., assessing for student learning; and (2) these standards have become less prescriptive for libraries, and open to interpretation.

On the other hand, most library assessment efforts consist of methods that provide indirect evidence of learning, such as student surveys (example, LIBQUAL+), and focus groups. In contrast, library assessment opportunities involving student learning for the most part have focused on information literacy initiatives. Other methods of assessment that provide direct evidence of learning include student work samples/portfolios, presentations, capstone projects, and course embedded-assessment. Thus, the full potential of the library Information Commons has yet to be explored as a teaching and assessment venue where collaboration and mentorship replace the traditional classroom.

Accordingly, this paper is a mini-case study of the Library and Information Commons at Georgia Institute of Technology in creating a learning environment that enables students to acquire desired information competencies, and at the same time provide new opportunities for assessing student learning outcomes in meaningful ways. Viewing the traditional library role in the context of its potential role as an integrator of technology services blended with research services, Georgia Institute of Technology Library and Information Commons developed the Library West Commons (LWC) in partnership with the Office of Information Technology (OIT). Rather than go it alone, the library initiated a joint planning process in collaboration with OIT to ensure the success of the Library West Commons when it became operational in July 2002.

With the aim of empowering students, the Library West Commons (LWC) Lab was conceived as a productivity computer lab and presentation facility designed to provide one-stop integrated service and support. The general mission of the Lab is to support and enhance the teaching-learning-research enterprise at Georgia Institute of Technology by providing assistance and support for 150+ software applications on LWC machines, software and hardware training sessions on request, as well as a comprehensive range of information services by library staff, and appointments with experienced technologists. Computing services technical expert assistance includes printing; scanning; digital photo, video, and sound editing; VHS video recording, editing, and conversion to digital files; sound conversion from tape recordings to digital files; 35 mm slide scanning; audio and video tape dubbing; graphics arts creation; DVD and CD burning; presentation building web development; and streaming video creation for online use.<sup>1</sup>

The LWC is equipped with the following state-of-the-art hardware and equipment: 100+ Windows 2000 workstations; iMacs; PowerMacs (G4s); photo/slide scanners; video capture setups; color printers; graphics tablet; VCR converter, dual MiniDV – DVCAM/ SVHS Deck; and camcorder checkouts. Also, power and network outlets are located throughout the LWC and library, and wireless cards are available for checkout so that students can use laptop computers.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the recently opened Resource Center in Library West offers a suite of support services: OIT Walk-in Support helps students, faculty, and staff with computer

account activation, password management, setting up wireless network connections, spam filtering, and similar computer-related support services; Success Programs 1-to-1 Tutoring in the evening; Undergraduate Academic Advising for students who are defining or re-defining their objectives and want to explore multiple study program options; and public print bins.<sup>3</sup>

Specific emphasis in the planning process focused on four primary organizing principles in order to provide a firm foundation for successful implementation. These organizing principles were (1) development of an initial partnership between the library and Office of Information Technology (OIT) to determine courses of action; (2) consensus that the LWC services and support would be student needs driven (student needs assessment surveys and focus groups); (3) agreement of a joint, integrated staffing model for service and support to include a new library hybrid position; and (4) top-down Administration support.

As institutions of higher education embark on the planning process to establish their Information Commons, there is a concerted effort to review the approaches and processes in place at selected universities, such as those listed at Appendix 2 – Websites Reviewed. Site visits may be limited or extensive. Particularly useful books, articles, papers, and presentations on various aspects of planning and developing an Information Commons are listed in Appendix 1 – Selected Readings.

Connecting the library's vision of its desired future to align with the institution's vision and mission as called for by the ACRL *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*<sup>4</sup> is a task that takes place within the context of applicable regional and professional accrediting standards. At the heart of these standards is the requirement that the institution demonstrates that it is fulfilling its educational mission, i.e., provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness. Specific components to be addressed by the organization include the following: create effective learning environments and support effective teaching both inside and outside the classroom; establish student learning outcomes for each educational program and assess student learning; and provide learning resources and library services to support student learning and effective teaching.

Accordingly, academic programs, including those of the library, are responsible for establishing learning outcomes and assessing student learning from a learning perspective in conjunction with programmatic assessments. Likewise, institutions of higher education are increasingly recognizing that much of a student's learning experience takes place outside of the classroom.<sup>5</sup> Thus, programs that facilitate student transition to college, such as the First Year Experience (FYE), and venues for integrating the learning experience, such as the library Information Commons, are gaining in popularity because their primary goal is student success – helping students to adjust to college learning in a peer, mentoring and collaborative environment.

Establishing a partnership with the Office of Information Technology (OIT) was a logical first step in order to harness the talents of two organizations most impacted by changing and converging technology that demanded a new service delivery model. At the same time that the number of research questions has leveled off at the Reference Desk, the number of requests for technical assistance using different computer applications has risen

dramatically, as well as the growing need for user instruction in new technologies to support curriculum requirements. This antidotal evidence and experiences of early adopters, such as the Universities of Calgary, Southern California, and Washington, confirmed the approach to partner with the Office of Information Technology for planning and staffing the Information Commons in the library as a joint collaborative effort.

Second, the library and OIT developed an early consensus that LWC services and support would be student needs driven using data collected from student needs assessment surveys and focus groups. With institution vision and mission statements in hand coupled with student retention data, the planning group proceeded to develop questions to provide the kind of information needed to determine services that could respond to student needs. The study team consisted of personnel from both the library and OIT.

As a result of the needs assessment survey and focus group meetings, the Georgia Institute of Technology study team developed a student learning needs report to guide the actions of the planning team in radically redesigning and equipping new learning spaces in the Information Commons, Presentation Classroom and Media areas. This report identified strong student interest in obtaining assistance in computer, information, and presentation skills, as well as the need for individual and collaborative work spaces and computers with productivity and specialized software. The hallmark of the Information Commons would be an integrated service point with flexibility to assist students at their computers

Third, the library and OIT agreed to a joint, integrated staffing model for training, service and support to include a new library hybrid position. In order to provide one-stop service and satisfy student learning needs during academic terms, the planning team developed a staffing model to provide service 24/5 from Noon Sunday to 6:00PM Friday, closed Friday night, open 9:00AM to 6:00PM Saturday. With a focus on enabling student learning and providing point-of-need instruction, the team developed library instruction for the new hybrid position, and technical/application skills training for librarians, staff and students working in the Information Commons. Selected personnel would learn specialized software.

Fourth, top-down Administrator support is key to developing the integrated library Information Commons. Without support from the university administration and a strategic vision and mission that supports its development, a computer lab will fall short of becoming an Information Commons that provides one-stop service. For over twenty years librarians have recognized the growing relationship and converging paths of the library and computing center. With the advent of the Information Commons concept, a new future for the library began to emerge in the mid-1990s. During this time, as Provost of the University of Washington, Dr. G. Wayne Clough put together a team to explore technology in learning – a precursor for librarians and computing personnel working together to form a new vision.<sup>6</sup> Shortly afterwards, in September 1994, Dr. Clough became the tenth President of the Georgia Institute of Technology. It is a tribute to President Clough's leadership, funding support, and the phenomenal success of the Library West Commons that Georgia Institute of Technology has a new Innovative Learning Center in development.

Among many related findings and recommendations, the review of the literature and Georgia Institute of Technology's experience affirm the role of the Information Commons in redefining a library's effectiveness in terms of user needs and learning expectations. Although some services performed in the Information Commons are not new, such as research clinics, term paper assistance, and tutoring, these services become more attractive to students because the Information Commons environment is conducive to learning, and has been designed around student learning needs. Likewise, libraries that have reshaped or created new physical spaces in response to their users' perceptions continue to search for new ways to take assessment to the next level, i.e., assessment that aids students to learn specific skills, competencies, and knowledge. *Assessing for Learning* by Peggy Maki provides useful examples, such as the presentation portfolio, that can be developed and assessed in the Information Commons.<sup>7</sup>

In summary, this paper is not only intended to be informative, but also provide an opportunity for dialogue and exchange of ideas on how the library Information Commons might ultimately take shape in facilitating and assessing student learning in the library.

### Works Cited

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- <sup>2</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Library West Commons Lab. Retrieved April 30, 2006, [http://www.oit.gatech.edu/computer\\_labs/lwc.php](http://www.oit.gatech.edu/computer_labs/lwc.php)
- <sup>3</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Help. Retrieved April 30, 2006, <http://www.oit.gatech.edu/help/overview.cfm>
- <sup>4</sup> Association of College and Research Libraries (2004). *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*. Retrieved May 15, 2006, <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/standardslibraries.htm>
- <sup>5</sup> Leavey Library 2004 Conference. Information Commons: Learning Space Beyond the Classroom, September 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup>, 2004, Retrieved May 15, 2006, <http://www.usc.edu/isd/libraries/locations/leavey/news/conference/presentations/>
- <sup>6</sup> Wilson, Elizabeth A. (2002). Collaborate or Die: Designing Library Space. *ARL Bimonthly Report 222*, Retrieved May 14, 2006, <http://www.arl.org/newsltr/222/collabwash.html>
- <sup>7</sup> Maki, Peggy L. (2004). *Assessing for Learning: Building a Sustainable Commitment Across the Institution*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC

## Appendix 1 – Selected Readings.

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Web site provides access to 20+ conference presentations on the library Information Commons as a viable learning space that complements the classroom
- MacWhinnie, Laurie A. (2003). The Information Commons: The Academic Library of the Future. *Portal*, 3, 241-257.
- Maki, Peggy L. (2004). *Assessing for Learning: Building a Sustainable Commitment Across the Institution*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC in association with the American Association for Higher Education.
- Westbrook, Lynn (2001). *Identifying and Analyzing User Needs: A Complete Handbook and Ready-to-Use Assessment Workbook With Disk*. New York: Neal-Schuman. Provides a structured, planned approach for conducting a user needs analysis.

## **Appendix 2 – Websites Reviewed:**

Accessed during April & May 2006

Emory University

<http://infocommons.emory.edu/>

Georgia Institute of Technology

[http://www.oit.gatech.edu/computer\\_labs/lwc.php](http://www.oit.gatech.edu/computer_labs/lwc.php)

Indiana University Bloomington

<http://ic.indiana.edu>

Kansas State University

<http://www.lib.ksu.edu/geninfo/infocommons.html>

University of Alberta

[http://www.ualberta.ca/CNS/labs/knowledge\\_common.html](http://www.ualberta.ca/CNS/labs/knowledge_common.html)

University of Arizona

<http://dizzy.library.arizona.edu/library/teams/pic/pic.htm>

University of Calgary

<http://www.ucalgary.ca/ic>

University of Chicago

<http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/crerar/using/facilities/>

University of Georgia

<http://www.slc.uga.edu/>

University of Iowa

<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/commons>

University of Michigan

<http://www.umm.umich.edu/>

University of North Carolina, Charlotte

<http://libweb.uncc.edu/library/infocom/>

University of Southern California

<http://www.usc.edu/isd/locations/undergrad/leavey/IC.html>

University of Toronto

<http://www.utoronto.ca/welcome.html>

University of Washington

<http://www.lib.washington.edu/ougl/>